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**Of Song and Soul: How a Young Man in Botswana is Redefining
His Traditional Culture in the Modern World**

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Report

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Abstract

Of Song and Soul: How a Young Man in Botswana is Redefining His Traditional Culture in the Modern World

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The San are an ethnic group that are among the closest living relatives to early humans in southern Africa and have been living in present-day Botswana for at least 25,000 years. They historically lived in egalitarian, hunter-gatherer societies moving freely across the semi-arid Kalahari region with animal migrations. They have become the most marginalized ethnic group in southern Africa and have faced many modern challenges, such as loss of land and traditional practices, assimilation into dominant cultures and lack of educational and economic opportunities.

Due to the San's cultural distinctiveness, outsiders have often deemed their traditional way of life as worthy of protecting for the sake of humanity, often forcing the San to remain as "relics" of early hunter-gatherer societies. While many San themselves consider their cultural heritage as important to preserve, this has created a tug-of-war between tradition and modern, forcing the San to choose one or the other. Alfred Cg'ase

Tshumu, who goes by his self-given name “Alphynho”, is a 27-year-old San living in D’kar, a community west of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, determined to move himself and his people forward while still holding onto traditional practices and indigenous knowledge passed down from elders. He is a multi-faceted person and aspiring musician, striving for upward mobility through his skills as an entrepreneur. His story illustrates the vibrancy of San culture alongside the contemporary challenges his people face.

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It's an unseasonably cool and cloudy winter afternoon in D'kar, Botswana. I trudge through the deep, iron-rich sand from my hostel to the Innovation Center, a small wooden community center. In a patch of deep sand in front of the facility's bustling workshop, I spy a young man inspecting an ordinary wheelbarrow. His short dreadlocks bouncing as he animatedly examines the tool, he mutters something to two older men and a young woman, scribbles in his notebook and then reaches down to feel the wheelbarrow's tire.

"We must design a new wheelbarrow that is suitable for deep sand because this normal wheelbarrow doesn't work well here," he says, erupting with laughter, as I approach. "If someone is carrying a heavy load of firewood in this wheelbarrow, the front wheel will get buried in the sand."

It's a brilliant idea. And Alfred Cg'ase Tshumu may be just the man to figure out how to overcome annoyance over a bad tool by creating a new and better one instead. Alfred, who prefers his self-assigned name, "Alphynho," is a 27-year-old member of the San ethnic group who is determined to use his entrepreneurial spirit and energy to not only launch his dream of becoming successful musician but to create new vehicles to refashion the identity of his people. The San are a challenged minority in Botswana's web of 10 main ethnic groups, with numerous sub-groups, often pigeon-holed for adherence to tradition and discriminated against in educational and job opportunities they need to push their community forward.

After a week of designing a prototype for a new wheelbarrow, Alphynho and his teammates, working with him on the project as part of a design summit hosted in D'kar, are beginning to bring their idea to life. Sitting in an old office chair outside of his modest

brick house, a short walk from the Innovation Center, Alphynho inflates a heavy-duty bicycle tire as he sings in French to a tune by Congolese musician Fally Ipupa blaring from his smartphone. His teammates loudly drill holes into a metal pole fastened to an upgraded cart with wheels. The children next door rush to the fence to get a peep at what's going on. "Our new wheelbarrow design is slowly getting there," he says with confidence.

Like other young San strivers, Alphynho is eager to help move himself and his people forward while keeping a hold on the beliefs and practices that form the core of his close-knit community. Building this prototype is the first step for Alphynho in creating a sustainable business for himself in D'kar. His wheelbarrow project is part of a month-long design summit, hosted by the Botswana-based social enterprise "These Hands" that aims to teach entrepreneurial and design skills to people in rural areas of Africa.

Alphynho has a passion for knowledge and is an avid reader, soaking up as much as he can to stimulate his mind. He is a happy-go-lucky kind of guy who embodies the Rastafari mentality, stemming from his deep admiration for reggae icon Bob Marley. It seems like Alphynho is doing everything right and has what it takes to turn his dreams into reality, but as a member of the most marginalized of ethnic groups in Botswana, realizing such ambitions isn't always easy. The country's majority ethnic group, the Tswana, make up almost 80 percent of Botswana's 2.3 million people, with the remaining 20 percent comprised of the white population and over 25 minority groups, which includes the San.

"We live in a world now where there's a lot going on and you have to do business because we live in a capitalist system," Alphynho explains. "So for you to

survive, you must at least have a business because jobs are hard to find. To be an entrepreneur is a great journey, but it's not simple.”

Botswana is a landlocked country in southern Africa. Roughly the size of Texas, almost 85 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Since Botswana gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1966, the economy has been largely fueled by diamond mining and tourism. Botswana had one of the world's highest economic growth rates, averaging at 9 percent each year, up until the global recession in 2008. After recovering from the recession in 2010, Botswana has experienced modest growth due mainly to a decline in the global diamond industry. Now, with the invention of synthetic diamonds, the value of diamonds in Botswana is expected to reach an all-time low in less than 10 years. Being a young person living in a rural area can be difficult in a country where the wealth is concentrated in the urban centers and over 40 percent of rural populations live in poverty. Being a member of southern Africa's most disadvantaged ethnic groups makes surmounting such challenges doubly difficult.

“The International Development sector has historically followed a top-down approach to development and technology intervention,” says Thabiso Mashaba, co-founder and CEO of “These Hands”. “While Botswana has managed to become a higher middle-income country, this top-down approach has left many behind.”

The San have been living in present-day Botswana for at least 25,000 years. They traditionally lived in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, moving freely across the semi-arid Kalahari region, which spans central Botswana into Namibia and South Africa. Today, the San have been relocated to settlements bordering their ancestral lands, where sustainable job opportunities can be few and far between, access to quality education is

difficult, and assimilation into dominant cultures is done without acknowledgement of San values and ways of thinking. Due to their long history as living descendants of the earliest humans, they have gained the attention of international NGOs in the larger indigenous rights movement. However, when indigeneity is only defined as people who live a traditional life, that tends to give people like the San only two choices: Stick with tradition or embrace modern development at the cost of giving up customary practices.

“If the idea is to preserve the hunter-gatherer lifestyle for humanity because it’s of cultural and historical worth to have that history still alive,” says Dr. Michaela Pelican, an anthropologist who has studied the complexities of indigeneity in post-colonial Africa, “it forces people to remain a certain way because if they change, we lose that thing that people deem worthy of protecting.”

San Values

It’s Saturday afternoon and we arrive back in D’kar after a grocery run to Ghanzi, a town about 40 kilometers south, where everyone does their shopping. I turn off the main tar road onto a sandy path as Alphynho navigates the way to his mother’s house. We rumble up into his family’s compound and start unloading the goods: a bag of maize used to make pap – a popular starchy dish in Africa served with meat – pasta, tea, sugar, a big bottle of cooking oil and seasonings. His mother is lying on her stomach on a blanket stretched over the sand in the shade of a shelter built from tree branches. After adding the last item to the stack of the food, Alphynho rinses a spoon in a bucket of warm water next to the fire to feed his little brother some liquid medicine. “The little ones are more vulnerable to cold and flu in the wintertime,” he tells me.

Next stop is to deliver grocers to the home of Alphynho's girlfriend, Nxadom, who goes by her nickname Jasta. She is currently in Ghanzi finishing her last year of tertiary school, but Alphynho takes care of her family like his own. Once we finally get back to Alphynho's house, he's only left with a few items for himself that fit neatly into his small backpack. He has told me many times that the two most important values in San culture are respect for your elders and caring for your family. He thinks of himself like a "big brother" to the kids in D'kar and sees his duty as reinforcing those values when he sees them being forgotten.

"Kids don't do things the way they used to," he says. "For example, when a parent speaks to you, you shouldn't interrupt them. Even if you think you're right and they're wrong, you should always respect and listen to your elders."

The next afternoon, Alphynho is getting his hair done at his "in-laws," how he refers to his girlfriend's family even though they are not yet married. He and his friends fancy a particular style of plaiting on the bottom close to their neck with free-form dreadlocks growing on top. With Alphynho seated in a plastic chair outside in the yard, Jasta's older sister, Nqokga, plucks a wooden thorn about an inch and a half long from the acacia above her and begins unraveling Alphynho's old braids. "I'd rather have Nqokga do my hair than go to a barbershop," he says. It's a nice, warm afternoon without a single cloud in the sky. Jasta's mother sits on the ground to do the laundry while the kids play soccer in the sand. It's almost lunchtime and Nqokga starts washing some bowls and plates with one of her 11-month-old twins on her hip. "She would like you to join us for lunch," Alphynho tells me. I start to shake my head, knowing they have a big family and many mouths to feed only to have Alphynho tap me on the knee and say,

“You are a guest here and it’s the San way to share our meal with you, even if it’s not much.”

“San people have this value of sharing, they’ve got a lot of generosity,” says Xukuri Xukuri, a 32-year-old activist for San rights. Xukuri works for the Kuru Trust Development, a nonprofit organization working to build sustainable livelihoods in D’kar and surrounding San settlements. “We can share even a small thing,” he tells me. Despite their long history of complex and often negative interactions with other groups, the San have always been very kind and generous people. In the mix of modern cultures influencing tradition, Alphynho is afraid that young kids are forgetting about this value. But the value of sharing and appreciation for what you have was instilled in him at a young age through his mother.

“There were times where she would give me money and I would give it back because I knew that she needed it more than I did,” he says. “She always told me, ‘Even if you don’t have much in life, it’s not a big deal. But it’s a big deal if you are not happy.’”

I drive along the rocky, sandy road toward a small house that sits surrounded by a sea of sand in a small neighborhood on the edge of Ghanzi. “It’s right here,” says O’Neil Leshope, Alphynho’s old friend from school with whom he recently reconnected. I park under the huge umbrella thorn acacia tree next to the house. O’Neil walks to the right half of the house and unlocks the door. He plops into a zebra print office chair in front of a large computer monitor, two MIDI keyboards, and a computer keyboard. Across from

him sits a recording microphone and a Canon on a tripod. Alphynho's jaw drops as he collapses on the small couch next to the door.

"Let me show you this beat I was telling you about," O'Neil says as Alphynho gets a notepad to write down some lyrics.

This is Alphynho's first time in a recording studio as nice as this one. In 2016, he recorded a song with a group of his friends in Naro and it became a huge hit in Ghanzi and the surrounding areas. It's a party song, one that's played in the bars, but he thinks it opened the door for him to potentially do solo work and write more meaningful content. O'Neil brought Alphynho here today to see if he can write lyrics to an instrumental song he's put together and then record a demo. His interest is in Alphynho's novelty as a San person and he wants to include Naro, Alphynho's native language, in his array of the diverse music he's already produced with some other ethnic groups in Botswana. After about an hour of listening to the same beat over and over again, Alphynho has some lyrics written and gets ready to step up to the mic.

The recording process for just the chorus takes a few hours, as O'Neil works with Alphynho to create harmonies and trains him to come in on the correct beat. O'Neil's energy starts to become exhausted through the tough process all while Alphynho remains steadfast. He has no formal training in music and maintains an even temperament throughout the frustrating process, nodding to O'Neil, apologizing when he makes a mistake and carries on trying again. When the sun begins to set, they wrap for the day to drive back to D'kar. O'Neil gives Alphynho a copy of the song with the recorded chorus for him to practice and start thinking of lyrics for the verses. Beaming with excitement,

Alphynho immediately plugs the auxiliary cable into his smartphone in the car and we listen to the new song the entire drive back to D'kar.

I'm amazed and inspired by Alphynho's unrelenting spirit. Today, he demonstrated his unwavering ambition in life – to make music, start his own business, create new art projects and anything else he sets his mind to. I think about myself and how I probably would have had very little patience in that situation, but he kept pushing through the tough parts, learning from his mistakes, and made incremental improvements throughout the day.

“The San are people who are patient and people who don't give up easily,” says Xukuri, citing another strong value in San culture. “During the hunting times, our forefathers would spend days in the bush, but they will not give up until they kill something and bring something home for their families to eat. That is the spirit of no surrender.”

A Changing Culture

Traipsing along a dirt road for what seems like eternity, I can tell I am already getting blisters on my feet. I pass around a big bottle of water to the kids on the journey with us and ask Alphynho, nearly out of breath, “How far is this spot?” He laughs and says, “Your body is not accustomed to long bush walks, huh?” I shake my head. “Don't worry, it's not too much farther,” he says before buoyantly skipping off to catch up with his girlfriend, Jasta.

Alphynho spots something and suddenly motions to Jasta's nieces and nephews, “Come over here, guys,” he says in Naro, the native language of the San in this region.

He points to a partially dug up tuber, a plant that grows underground that the San traditionally used as a source of drinking water. “This tuber shouldn’t be eaten because it’s toxic. Be sure to not confuse it with the other kind,” he explains to the kids in Naro as they eagerly nod.

If Alphykho, his girlfriend, and the children were doing this activity at one of the nearby lodges, it would look a lot different. They would all be wearing traditional animal skin clothing, carrying traditional tools – like a bow and arrow and a long stick for digging up tubers, and they would be accompanied by a group of tourists and a translator. Out here, with no spectators in sight, Alphykho wears a black long-sleeve running shirt, long shorts with tall socks, and a pair of bright blue Nike tennis shoes. To many outsiders, this isn’t a romantic enough image of the living descendants of the first people of Africa. But it’s the outsiders that have long defined who the San are, and should be, as a group of people.

“They are the personification of the early hunter-gatherers that humanity needs to know and preserve,” Dr. Michaela Pelican says, an anthropologist whose studies indigeneity in Africa. “Their identity has been ascribed to them saying that this is how they are supposed to be.”

The San continue to be marginalized through the systemic processes of assimilating them into the dominant culture. Government officials often leave them out of conversations about development policies revolving around issues of education, health, economic opportunities and more. They have been discriminated against by fellow citizens of Botswana for their cultural distinctiveness to the extent that in Botswana’s national language Setswana, the term “basarwa” has been used to describe the San, which

carries the negative meaning “those who do not have cattle” since owning cattle is a symbol of wealth in Botswana. Alphynho feels like most people his age don’t care about defending their traditions and values. But he refuses to back down from his true identity as a San but at the same time, he doesn’t want to have to choose between tradition or modernism, he wants there to be room for both.

“You must really know who you are,” says Alphynho. “Then other things will just fall into place.”

It’s a cold night in July and what seems to be the entire village is gathered under a large tent as James Morris reads a passage from the Bible in Setswana, the national language of Botswana. James Morris is a respected elder in the community of D’kar, as well as a pastor in the church, and tonight he’s leading a somber event: the funeral of Alphynho’s great uncle, who passed away the week before from a pulmonary disease. I’m cuddled next to Jasta and many other women sitting on bags on the floor of the tent. The funeral lasts all night, as family members pray and sing for their lost loved one and then put his body to rest during a burial service very early the next morning.

“We are living the Tswana culture. It’s like they want us to be like them,” Alphynho tells me about this ritual along with many other ways that the San have been assimilated into the dominant Tswana culture.

Funerals used to not be practiced in this way for the San. Because they used to be more mobile, moving freely across the Kalahari with animal migrations, when someone passed on, it was customary to leave their body inside one of the temporary houses they built. Now that they are settled and don’t move around anymore, they have picked up the

Tswana funeral tradition, much different than the one they are used to. Alphynho frequently ponders the ways in which his culture has changed. He longs to go out to hunt in the bush with his grandfather and to have the freedom to teach his future sons the same. But at the same time, he embraces the technology that his people are able to have access to now and their ability to reach to other worlds beyond theirs.

“With education now, we are learning different things from other worlds,” he says. “I think it’s good that we are able to learn new languages to communicate with other people. You just have to choose which outside influences you let in because some are toxic.”

The San have edged away from the global indigenous rights movement and tried to cope in smaller ways, like improving their daily lives, and anthropologists are seeing their situation slowly improve due to young San, like Alphynho and Xukuri, who are pursuing higher education, becoming more involved improving their situation, and coming up with innovative ways to thrive. This may create a shift from the drive for the San’s human rights situation coming from outsiders to insiders.

“It is important to say that most of the young generation, who have a higher education through university or are working with international NGOs and agencies, have more experience with how to negotiate with the government,” says Dr. Junko Maruyama, an anthropologist based in Tokyo, who has done research on the San in the Ghanzi area of Botswana since 2000.

The San collectively have not had access to the highest quality of education and Alphynho says that due to many elders still being illiterate, it’s difficult for them to encourage their young ones to care about school and instill in them the value of learning.

Alphynho feels like he has always been a little different from other San his age and he attributes that to the way his mother raised him to be independent and have ambition in life. “I wanted to change the socioeconomic status of our family,” he says. “God created us with brains, so we have to use them wisely. We are smart, but we just need to have direction.”

Looking to the Future

It’s a Sunday afternoon and the weather is pleasantly warm again after two weeks of unseasonal cold and rain. Alphynho’s grandfather Xgaiga shuffles around an old abandoned building, using a cane as support. He’s dressed nicely – wearing khaki’s and a white button-up shirt – having just come from church service. The building is falling apart. The roof is gone, there is no glass in any of the window openings and no doors to any of the rooms. The grass is overgrown in what probably used to be a manicured backyard. Two cows walk slowly through the tall grass, bells clamoring around their necks as they raise their heads up and down to eat.

Xgaiga speaks to me in Naro as Alphynho translates. “He says that he acquired this land and old building recently and wants to work with me to turn it into a lodge and campsite,” Alphynho tells me in English. Alphynho walks slowly through the space and squints his eyes as if he’s drawing up a picture in his mind. “I see so much potential here.”

You can see the years of wisdom in Xgaiga’s eyes. He has a very warm face and a wispy, white mustache sits neatly groomed above his smile. He’s a well-respected elder in the community, not to mention the elder Alphynho respects the most in his life.

Alphynho attributes most of the indigenous knowledge he's gained over the years to his grandfather.

Alphynho strives to be a driving force of change in his own community. He has ideas to create opportunities for youth in his community to learn traditions from their elders and express their feelings about their culture through art, dance, and music. He wants to manage a business with his new wheelbarrow design in the future and his skills learned during the design summit and put them to good use. And he will never forget his roots as he presses on into the future, in true spirit of no-surrender.

"You also can't be blown away by any wind that comes around," Alphynho says. "You must stand your ground and keep your roots. If you are in contact with your past, it's a base for your now and for what's coming."



Alphynho walks along a dirt path to his home while singing and dancing to a song playing on his smart phone in his pocket.



Portrait of Alphynho.



Alphynho talks to his nephew Thabiso during a visit at his aunt's house.



Alphynho picks the strings at his guitar as he tries to teach himself how to play. He found this guitar smashed and completely broken, so he glued it back together and found some fishing wire that he uses for the strings.



Alphynho dabbles on his new guitar outside of his friend's house. He loves to play music, dance and write new songs with his friends.



Portrait of Alphynho.



Double exposure of Alphynho with an acacia bush common throughout the Kalahari region.



Alphynho approaches his friend waiting to cross the main tar road that runs along the edge of D'kar.



Alphynho pets his friend's horse while out on an evening walk. He says he used to ride horses all the time when he was young and remembers the experiences fondly.



Alphynho watches his great uncle play the guitar while he washes a bowl by the fire. Alphynho says that musical talent is passed down from generation to generation, so his inclination towards music runs in his blood.



Alphynho and his friend go for an evening walk around the community. D'kar is small, with less than 2,000 residents, so everyone knows everyone.



Alphynho picks out spice packets from Fours, a wholesale store in Ghanzi that is similar to Costco.



X'aga, Alphynho's mother, sits with her other son Cao at her home after Alphynho delivers some food he bought for his family in Ghanzi.



Alphynho gives medicine to his cousin to help with cold and flu, a common ailment during wintertime, especially among children.



Alphynho tickles his nephew Thabiso during a visit to his mom's house. Alphynho describes his role as an uncle as almost father-like and how lovingly jokes around with his nephews.



Alphynho rubs a pool ball for good luck before taking a shot while his friend Nico watches Senegal vs. Costa Rica play in the 2018 World Cup behind him.



Alphynho plays pool at the only bar in D'kar, about a 15-minute walk from the community center. The bar is housed in a building that was converted from a fuel station shop that shut down many years ago.



Toilets outside the bar are illuminated in front of a sunset gradient.



Alphynho sings along to his own song that he and his friends recorded in 2016 while ironing some curtains in his room.



Portrait of Alphynho having a cigarette break during a long afternoon in his friend's recording studio in Ghanzi.



Alphynho rehearses the lyrics he wrote to the producer's instrumental song before recording.



Alphynho listens to the progress of the song he's recording with a music producer in Ghanzi.



A silhouette of Alphynho after a dance class with some kids in D'kar.



Bare footprints, shoeprints and tire tracks sprinkled along a sandy path in D'kar. There is only one tar road entering D'kar from the main highway and the rest are made of sand or rock.



Alphynho washes his hair over a small bucket before having new plaiting done.



Alphykho uses the camera on his phone to check his hair while having his old plaiting undone.



Nqokga, Alphykho's girlfriend's sister, does new plaiting on the bottom part of Alphykho's head, the signature “look” among he and his friends.



Alphynho snacks on a berry during a berry-picking expedition and bush walk with his girlfriend and her nieces and nephews.



Alphynho holds berries from a *grewia flava*, a type of shrubby bush native to southern Africa. Their taste is a combination of sour, bitter and sweet flavors with a very fibrous texture.



Alphynho and his berry-picking crew stumble across a large termite mound while on their bush walk.



Alphynho performs a traditional dance around the fire for the other participants of the design summit hosted in D'kar.



Alphynho's grandfather, Xgaiga, wears traditional animal skin dress, a beaded belt and rattlers made from seed pods on his calves to perform a traditional dance around the fire for the participants of the design summit. Xgaiga shared the importance of the flora and fauna of the Kalahari to San culture and says that many songs are named after them to express gratitude for providing their people with sustenance.



Alphynho laughs as his grandfather, Xgaiga, tells a story about the seed he holds in his hand, relating its growth to life and hope.



Alphynho looks out of a glassless window of the abandoned house he wants to fix up with his grandfather and turn into a lodge for tourists.

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